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## Democrats Critical Of Rell's Proposal To Trim Life Star Funding

*Governor accused of cutting from wrong place as state's budget stalemate drags on*

By Ted Mann

**Norwich** - Looking to highlight the deepest spending cuts proposed by Gov. M. Jodi Rell, leading state Democrats found a jackpot inside the white-walled hangar at The William W. Backus Hospital Tuesday.

There sat a Life Star helicopter, ready to deploy to pick up badly injured accident victims and transfer high-risk surgical patients across the state of Connecticut.

Rell, a Republican who is seeking to balance the 2010-11 state budget with spending cuts instead of tax hikes, has proposed slashing the state's entire \$1.4 million annual subsidy for Life Star. The cut, Democrats and some hospital officials warned, could lead to reductions in the medical flights or imperil them altogether.

"Life Star is on life support," declared Senate President Donald E. Williams Jr., D-Brooklyn, as he and fellow Democratic lawmakers stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Backus officials and - for the benefit of television cameras - inspected the first-class trauma equipment packed into the back of the trim blue-and-white helicopter.

Tuesday's event was just one of many that Democratic leaders are hoping to use to pressure Rell to relax her no-tax-increase stance, as the end of the fiscal year approaches with little progress toward a new state budget.

Life Star is "an integral part of the regional EMS system," said David Coletti, the medical director of the Backus Trauma Program, adding a warning that the roughly \$7 million program must be maintained, not only to respond to serious accidents but to transport patients from hospitals like Backus, which doesn't perform critical procedures like heart bypass surgeries and some neurosurgical procedures, to other facilities that do.

"We cannot put a price tag on saving lives," Coletti said. "This program needs to survive."

"There are other places in our budget to save money," declared Sen. Edith Prague, D-Columbia, who also said Rell is "usually much more sensitive to the needs" of the state than to propose such a reduction.

But the lawmakers, who also included Sens. Andrea Stillman and Andrew Maynard, and Reps. Kevin Ryan, Elissa Wright and Betsy Ritter, concede that finding those cuts can be more difficult than it seems.

Pressed to identify cuts that Rell could substitute for her Life Star reduction, Prague offered two possibilities: Consolidating satellite campuses of the University of Connecticut or cutting the number of deputy commissioners employed at state agencies.

But Williams and other lawmakers conceded that even the savings from those moves could be limited by the union concession deal negotiated by Rell - and ratified by the legislature last month - which prohibits the state from laying off broad swaths of its workforce for the next two years in exchange for wage givebacks.

Instead, the lawmakers believe, they will have to strike a deal with Rell that includes more service cutbacks than Democrats seek, and tax increases that Rell has heretofore said she could avoid.

"This was a difficult cut to make, but this is an extraordinarily difficult economic environment," said Jeffrey R. Beckham, the undersecretary for legislative affairs at the Office of Policy and Management, the governor's budget office. "Just to put this in some context, however, the state budget line item in question is a partial subsidy for that program that only covers a small portion of the program's operating expenses. The line item did not exist before 2002."

Life Star is operated by Hartford Hospital and flies two helicopters, one from Hartford and one from Norwich.

Hartford Hospital, Beckham added, "is a for-profit enterprise that can make some internal efficiencies and reallocate its resources, just as the state is having to do in this difficult economic time, and continue the program even with the loss of this small subsidy."

Meanwhile, the Democrats' road show will continue on Thursday, when leaders are slated to attend a rally featuring hundreds of school kids at the Amistad Academy, a successful charter school in New Haven. Rell has proposed cutting funding for charters by 10 percent.